



# Re-framing Benjamin

## One Way Street: Fragments for Walter Benjamin

*In the fields with which we are concerned knowledge exists only in lightning flashes...The text is the thunder rolling long afterwards.*

Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*

**W**alter Benjamin is probably best known in Australia for his essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility'.<sup>\*</sup> The context for this essay is the rise of Fascism in 1920s and '30s Europe. Benjamin warns against the dangers of Fascism's appropriation of mass culture and mass media. Such efforts work to render politics aesthetic, he argues, and culminate in only one thing — war. This describes a Fascist strategy in which the masses are allowed to express themselves but at the cost of their political rights. By 1940, Walter Benjamin, German-Jewish philosopher, literary critic and cultural theorist, is dead. Benjamin committed suicide in the town of Port Bou after an unsuccessful attempt to cross the Franco-Spanish border in flight from the Gestapo.

At the end of 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility', Benjamin offers a response to Fascism's aestheticization of politics. He reverses the terms and seeks to politicize art. In *One Way Street: Fragments for Walter Benjamin* we have a stunning example of what this might mean and how it might look. Written, directed and produced by Melbourne-based independent filmmaker John Hughes, *One Way Street* is a new Australian documentary about Benjamin's life and work. It is a documentary that is also about art in the age of its electronic and digital (re)producibility.

*One Way Street* is a complex, visually startling documentary which uses many of the technical, formal and rhetorical devices with which we are familiar from television and advertising. It constructs for us a kaleidoscope of images which convey the tragedy and dislocation of the life of this European intellectual. But in its use of the techniques of mass media, *One Way Street* also goes to the heart of Benjamin's own work and methodology. Benjamin, in his analysis of mass culture, was interested in the cultural artefacts of his time. But his fascination was with the mundane rather than the canonical, and with the discarded rubble out of which, he argued, something new could be built. His method offered an allegory for understanding his own society — the 'something new' that should have been built out of the ruins of the Weimar Republic. *One Way Street* conjures up for us a similar image of our own global media society. It suggests that Benjamin's work offers a prophetic image which prefigures our understanding of modernist and postmodernist culture that is media culture.

The title of the film is drawn from one of two books Benjamin was able to publish in his lifetime. The book itself is a collection of fragments which encapsulates the unique qualities of Benjamin's montage style. This is a method of working which has a sense of play — like children who are attracted to the heaps of rubble produced on construction sites because they like to build new things out of what has been discarded.

*One Way Street* is a sort of televisual re-assembly. The spoken and written word — Benjamin's fragments as text on the screen and as dramatic performance — dynamically collide with the visual possibilities of digital video technology. Single frames are made up of fragments of numerous visual texts. These are intercut with

<sup>\*</sup>Commonly translated as 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'

more conventional interviews with leading English-language Benjamin scholars. Highly stylized dramatic reconstructions of fragments from Benjamin's life are intercut with archival footage of early twentieth-century Modernist film; with footage from Dziga Vertov's early Russian montage film *Man with a Movie Camera* and with super graphics of quotations from Benjamin... Quotations in my works are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his conviction' (*Das Passagen-Werk*).

In the clash but also harmony of this rich textuality, the documentary proposes an understanding of our place in contemporary media culture. It offers us something new out of the rubble and noise of television. But rather than using the techniques of television to rework Benjamin, *One Way Street* uses Benjamin's techniques to rework television. That is, one significant context for reading *One Way Street* is that of television itself — what television can be made to image for us and to imagine for us about our contemporary media culture. In this way, Hughes offers us a vision of Benjamin's strategy to politicize art.

*One Way Street* was broadcast on ABC Television in December last year. It is the first English-language film about Benjamin. That it is made in Australia, for an Australian television audience (as well as for International Film Festival distribution) with Australian actor Nico Lathouris performing the gestures of this German-Jewish intellectual, is an important and significant imaging for a re-figuring of an international cultural politics. It is a translation/transformation between cultures, languages, political frames and digital technologies. But importantly, it is also a translation between two very powerful social institutions — education and the media.

Walter Benjamin is certainly more likely to be familiar to those within a tertiary education institution than to a general television audience. And *One Way Street* is certainly no simple translation between these audiences. It is not a neat bio-pic popularizing the work of an important European intellectual. Part of the work the documentary does is to trace the changing reception of Benjamin's work, traditionally in university Literature departments, but increasingly in Cultural Studies and among cultural producers.

The refusal of a coherent, but necessarily fictional, psychological profile in *One Way Street* and the emphasis on these changes of reception foregrounds Benjamin's own view of what it means to view the past historically. '[It] doesn't mean to recognize the way it really was. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger' (*Theses on the Philosophy of History*). And what is the moment of danger which enables us now to remember Walter Benjamin in John Hughes' film? Might it be that the way we use our mass media and the way our mass media uses us is a moment of danger that triggers his memory? A telephone call to any arts bookshop in Melbourne will inform you that there is an upsurge in interest in Benjamin's work at present and significant English translations such as *Illuminations* are in demand.

Situating Benjamin's work within the academy offers an interesting juxtaposition to the Benjamin we encounter in *One Way Street*. Unlike the documentary, the academy is a domain still largely slave to the written word. But education is increasingly mediated and mediatized. Consider that in 1993 as many as 10,000 students will be enrolled in TV education, the Open University programme which has media taking up the traditional role played by the academy. The way in which media takes up education or education takes up media, and the way in which capitalism stages this relationship, should be of great concern. Perhaps it is even a moment of danger. We are typically told one story, one allegorical narrative about this, but it is a story which refuses any danger. It is the story of progress: a scientific and economic rationalist narrative about a natural, seamless and inevitable progression. But we as subjects of contemporary media culture are daily bombarded by contradictory electronic and digital signals which operate quite differently. The sense we make of this will determine our capacity to act in new ways. Benjamin would tell us that these shock effects of the media should be cushioned by a heightened presence of mind. He rejects the view of history which complacently tells

stories of progress, a view Benjamin argues is untenable:

*The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are still possible in the 20th century is not philosophical.*

*This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge ... unless of course it is the knowledge that the view of history that gives rise to it is untenable. (Theses on the Philosophy of History.)*

*One Way Street* stages one moment of danger. Walter Benjamin himself points a camera directly at us. It is like a flash of memory. The image is repeated. This action renders us, an Australian television audience, Benjamin's subject. It is a studio shot. A red curtain draped to Benjamin's left reveals thunderous clouds rolling in the sky behind him. The powder in the flashlight is ignited, his nineteenth century mechanical apparatus does its work. The image freezes, fades to black and white. Then later, the image and the gesture are repeated. This time there is no freeze frame, no fade to black and white. Benjamin continues to look directly at us. We have become the object of his gaze and thus the subject of history. This process, this repetition — which is the same but different — is building something new. It is a process of re-assembly in the age of digital and electronic technology. It is also the continuing circulation of his ideas, his work as the materials for an ongoing praxis.

#### *History breaks down into images not into stories*

In conclusion, the challenge *One Way Street* provokes is as television, rather than just as a film on television. It is a multilayered, multitextual and multimediatized structure. The fragmentary re-imaging (rather than re-telling) of Benjamin's life and work in *One Way Street* is profoundly anti-illusionistic. It lays bare the competing technologies of the mass media, producing an allegorical text which is approachable only in an act of reading. That these technologies mediate our understanding of Benjamin and our understanding of our place in history in the international political economy performs the important work of politicizing history. And if this incites our interest, perhaps we then have the possibility of taking other than a one-way street.

**Marion Benjamin**

*Marion Benjamin is a post-graduate student of film at Murdoch University..(One Way Street distribution enquiries: John Hughes, 27 Ethel St, East Brunswick.)*